

# A Philosophy of Ethical Behavior

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## Abstract

Morality and ethics is produced from non-empirical information or innate understanding as well as from empirical information. It is acquired through sensory and non-sensory experiences including information received from formal study, cultural environment, religious preferences as well as rational thought. This analysis will discuss Kant's perspective of morality and development of the Moral Imperative, which is the foundation of deontological ethical theory. Deontology will be compared with consequentialism. The effect of these ethical theories will be related to macro-ethic and micro-ethic strategies as well as compliance-oriented and integrity-oriented approaches to ethical behavior.

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Morality and ethics is produced from non-empirical information or innate understanding as well as from empirical information. It is acquired through sensory and non-sensory experiences including information received from formal study, cultural environment, religious preferences as well as rational thought. This information, after being subjected to justification tests, becomes the foundation of moral philosophy and ethical behavior. A leader's philosophy of ethics should address the fact that information is not interpreted the same by all people due to their physical and mental diversity. Even though individuals may acquire moral information similarly, they interpret it relative to their unique culture, gender, environment, and mental state. This interpretation is frequently influenced by consequentialism or deontological ethical theory and manifested in compliance-oriented or integrity-oriented ethical behavior approaches.

### Kantian Effect on Ethical Theory

Emanuel Kant brought stability to philosophy through his effort to reconcile the differences between the rationalist philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza, and empirical philosophers like Berkeley. Kant believed both perspectives were partly incorrect and partly correct in their perspective regarding the source of knowledge (Moser & Vander Nat, 1995). Both sensing and reason help form our conception of the world, our moral belief, and ethical behavior. Kant believed that humans have "practical reason" (Gaarder, 1994, p. 257). This is the part of intelligence that gives us the ability to discern right and wrong. Practical reason is the foundation of universal moral law that guides our actions not just for specific situations but also for all situations. It is the cornerstone of what is known as Kant's "moral or categorical

imperative” (Oliver, 1997, p. 89). The moral imperative requires moral action to be applied in all situations, and that it is commanding and absolutely authoritative. This philosophy produces two key Kantian axioms:

1. “Always act in such a way that you can also will that the maxim of your action should become universal law.”
2. “Act so that you treat humanity, both in your own person and in that of another, always as an end and never merely as a means” (Gaarder, 1994, p. 257).

In essence, these axioms mean that if we act out of good will, per the moral imperative, it is this act that determines if our behavior is morally right, not the consequences of the act. This idea becomes the foundation of deontology or duty-based ethics.

### Consequentialism and Deontology

Consequentialism refers to a class of normative moral theories, which maintain that an action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable. In addition, the Utilitarianism view posits “Everybody to count for one, and nobody for more than one” and “The greatest good of the greatest number” (Magee, 1998, p. 182). The foundation of consequentialism is that it does not matter what kind of act we do; what matters is that we maximize the good results of our actions.

Deontology refers to the Kantian philosophy that all people have an innate knowledge of right and wrong that Kant calls the *universal moral law*, and this infers that we have an obligation to what is right in all situations. In addition, deontology presupposes that people have the ability to discern what is right relative to the values, beliefs, norms, and ideals that are imbedded in their culture. Lewis (1990) declares that all people have an idea of decent behavior known variously as the “Law of Right and Wrong” or the “Law of Nature” (p. 17-19). The Law

of Right and Wrong suggests, as posited by Kant, that humans have a priori knowledge of what is right, fair, and just.

The problem with consequentialistic ethical theory is that it is more relativistic than it is absolute and therefore, runs the risk of providing justification to immoral behavior. For instance this ethical theory seeks to maximize the good for the most people. This means that an action is morally correct if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable for everyone. This begs the questions, “What is favorable?” and “Who is everyone?” Consider early American slavery. It seemed favorable to the “white everyone” but certainly not to the “black everyone.” Our ancestors, including former black slaves, conquered the American west for the “favorable” result of expanding our country’s socio-economic infrastructure at the expense of the “red everyone.” During World War II Hitler persecuted the “Jewish everyone” to obtain the perceived favorable results of reclaiming economic control of Germany and creating an Aryan race. Recently, Islamic revolutionaries have attacked the United States to achieve what the “Muslim everyone” regard as favorable results at the expense of the “American everyone.” In each example, a vast number of people justified the ethics of their actions through application of the consequentialism tenet that an action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable. This fundamental weakness of consequentialism is revealed in a hypothetical discussion where a deontologist attacks a consequentialist:

It is you, not we, who are concerned with your own moral purity. Your position has the effect of absolving you of all personal responsibility for the things you do. There’s no element of personal decision; you simply calculate, and do what the numbers tell you to do, as if you were a machine. You tell your victim, ‘Sorry, it’s not me, you understand, I’m just an instrument of greater good.’ Moreover, if you’ve done some horrible thing

in pursuit of some supposed greater good, and it turns out to have terrible consequences, you shrug your shoulders and say, “I’m not to blame, it just turned out that way.” In essence, you try to transform yourself into a kind of unquestioning slave of utility maximization, and thereby try to escape all personal responsibility by blaming your decisions and actions on your master. (Vuletic, 2002, p. 1)

### Ethical Approaches

Ethics is concerned with what is right and is expressed as moral conduct standards. Hosmer (2003) states,

Moral standards of behavior are our gauges of individual and organizational actions. They are the means we all use to decide whether our actions, and those of other people and other groups with whom we live and work, are ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ ‘fair’ or ‘unfair,’ ‘just’ or ‘unjust.’ The problem is that our moral standards of behavior are subjective. (p. 5)

Macro-ethics relates to the subjective nature of moral standards within a society. Morality is produced from non-empirical information or innate understanding as well as from empirical information. It is acquired through sensory and non-sensory experiences including information received from formal study, cultural environment, religious preference as well as rational thought. This information, after being subjected to justification tests, can become the foundation for personal norms, beliefs, and values.

Micro-ethics directs a person’s behavior. Even though individuals may acquire moral knowledge similarly, they interpret it relative to their unique culture, gender, environment, and mental state. Micro-ethics also relates to professional standards of conduct that are issued by organizations. Examples include the code of ethics issued by the American Medical Association

and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. These micro-ethic approaches are designed to operate within the macro-ethic environment of society to refine the ethical conduct of people in a special segment of society. Micro-ethics, however, appear to be applied relative to a person's orientation to a particular ethical theory such as consequentialism or deontology.

Ethical behavior can be influenced by compliance-oriented or integrity-oriented strategies. Most formal ethics programs are compliance oriented. Compliance oriented ethical strategies appear to be concerned with what is wrong rather what is right, and the motivation for ethical behavior stems from punishment avoidance (Weaver & Trevino, 2002). Integrity-oriented strategies, however, are based on a person's desire to conduct their behavior in a moral manner. This Kantian strategy is concerned with what is right rather than what is incorrect ethical behavior and tends to produce more ethical behavior than compliance-oriented strategies.

Weaver (2002) states,

Therefore, the more employees perceive an organization to be either values oriented or compliance oriented, the more they would be aware of ethical issues, the better ethical decisions they would make, the more they would seek ethical advice, and the less unethical behavior they would observe. (p. 330)

#### Personal Philosophy of Ethics

This writer agrees with Hosmer's (2003) declaration that successful organizations infuse managerial balance with economic outcomes. Organizations "...need to establish organizational values, corporate goals, and a firm mission statement combining the values and goals" (2003, p. 131). Organizational integrity exists when the organization firmly adheres to its values, goals, and mission statement. The result is trust and commitment from organization members as shown

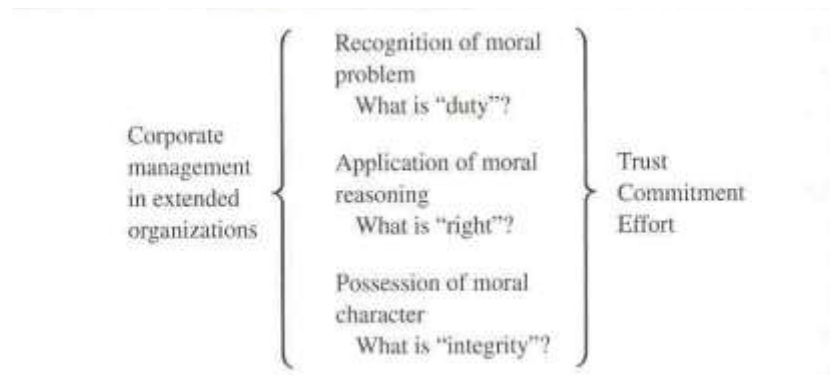
in Figure 1 from Hosmer (2003, p. 124). This deontological perspective is particularly attractive to this writer because it directly relates to Kant's Moral Imperative.

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Figure 1

Building Trust, Commitment, and Effort within an Organization

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An integrity-oriented ethics strategy may be ineffective if compliance guidelines are not established. Just because some activity is legal does not necessarily make it ethical but compliance guidelines may reduce this ambiguity. Therefore, it seems necessary to go beyond professional codes of conduct and operational guidelines. An integrity-oriented ethics strategy should address the idea of morality as a body of guidelines for individual action (Beauchamp, 1997). It is this writer's opinion that a combination of compliance-orientation and integrity-orientation is necessary to create an efficacious ethics strategy. The result should be an improvement in manager's integrity to balance economic benefits, legal requirements, and ethical duties against organizational requirements.

This writer believes in continuously developing skills to become an ethical leader at both a professional and private level. This commitment is accurately described by Bennis and Goldsmith (1997),



Leaders are responsible for the set of ethics and norms that govern the behavior of people in the organization. Leaders can lead through ethics in several ways. One is to demonstrate through their own behavior their commitment to the ethics they are trying to institutionalize. Leaders set the moral tone by carefully choosing the people with whom they surround themselves, by communicating a sense of purpose to the organization, by reinforcing appropriate behavior, and by articulating moral positions to external and internal constituencies. (p. 135)

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